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RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 0688  
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 3650  
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 1805  
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/29/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [JO](#)  
SUBJECT: KING ACCEPTS RESIGNATIONS OF HEALTH AND WATER  
MINISTER; POSITIVE REACTION TO EXAMPLE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

REF: AMMAN 3177

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: PM Bakhit announced on July 29 the resignations of Minister of Water and Irrigation Alem and Health Minister Kharabsheh. The two offered their resignations following parasitic contamination of water supplies in northeastern Jordan that infected hundreds. New ministers have not been named; Environment Minister Irani will assume responsibility for the Water Ministry and Minister of Political Development Oran will manage the Health Ministry. Other officials in the water and health sectors also stepped down. Local media had extensive coverage of the announcement and while some blame the media for instigating the furor over the outbreak, many view the resignations as examples of GOJ accountability and good governance. Alem's departure may be a loss to the water sector, but Environment Minister Irani is a close ally and advocate of alternative water management strategies. His tenure, while likely short, may present opportunities to seriously discuss changes to Jordan's water policy. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) During a July 29 press conference, Prime Minister Marouf Bakhit announced the issuance of a royal decree accepting the resignations of Minister of Water and Irrigation Zafer Al Alem and Health Minister Saad Kharabsheh. The PM explained the two resigned out of their "moral responsibility" following the mid-July cryptosporidium contamination of water tanks in Mafraq Governorate that sent hundreds to the hospital (reftel). Several senior officials at both ministries have also tendered their resignations, taken early retirement, or accepted reassignments. Until new ministers are announced, Minister of Environment Khaled Irani will assume responsibility for the Water Ministry and Dr. Mohammad Al Oran, Minister of Political Development, the only physician in the current Cabinet and a vocal critic of U.S. policies in the region, will serve as acting Minister of Health. COMMENT: Alem and Water Authority of Jordan Secretary General Munther Khleifat, who also resigned, were

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seasoned, well respected professionals with considerable experience in the water sector. It may be difficult to identify equally talented and experienced successors. END

COMMENT.

¶3. (U) The PM further announced the formation of an official investigative body to examine the outbreak and subsequent response, and make recommendations on safeguarding public health. The body will be led by Minister of State for Legal Affairs Khalid Zu'bi with participation from the ministries of environment and justice. The PM declined to comment on whether the GOJ would pursue legal action against the two former ministers.

¶4. (U) Both English and Arabic dailies carried extensive coverage of the resignations on both the news and editorial pages. A Jordan Times editorial commented, "In all fairness, while the two Cabinet ministers may have been well unaware of the health hazards...they should be held to account for the simple reason that it is their duty to know the smallest detail of any situation for which they are responsible." The column continued that the resignations should have been offered immediately after the outbreak, but nevertheless set an example of good governance that should be observed throughout Jordan. Independent, pro-business Arabic daily Al-Ghad described the resignations as "inevitable," explaining the actions "entrenched the concept of responsibility and accountability."

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Reaction to the resignations is generally positive, with many touting the ministers' decisions as examples of good governance. This phenomenon, however, is not new: in 1998, former Water and Irrigation Minister Haddadin stepped down after contaminated water from the Zai Treatment Plant entered the distribution system. Critics of the July 29 resignations blame the press for exaggerating the situation and focusing attention on the GOJ when, in their view, the real culprits were farmers who illegally accessed water for their livestock by shooting holes in pipes which allowed waste to seep into the system. The current crisis

may open a new chapter in Jordan's water management policy. There is increased attention on the faults in the water supply network and the ineffective enforcement of existing laws. Additionally, Acting Water Minister Irani is a long-time friend of the Embassy and supporter of USG activities in Jordan. He is a proponent of more efficient water use and his tenure, while likely to be short, may present an opportunity to emphasize much needed alternative strategies in water management.

¶6. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The King's Office Director, Bassem Awadallah, and GOJ spokesman/cabinet member Nasser Judeh separately told the Ambassador that PM Bakhit was hesitant to seek these resignations, and it was only upon the King's return from a North American trip that the King personally forced action. The Royal Palace has mobilized GID and other tools to blunt Islamist victories in the July 31 municipal elections, and part of the strategy was to show Government responsiveness to socio-economic needs in such neglected areas as Mafraq. The timing of this health crisis was damaging, and more so was a perception of complacency and tardiness in the ministries' initial response. It is hoped that with this move, the GOJ will have demonstrated a refreshing accountability and turned this setback into a possible gain in the elections.

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